Lifestyle

Who ya gonna call? 6C

Animation sparks Rock-afire Explosion

By Gina White
Staff Writer

They play at several spots simultaneously. Their music includes country, pop and soul. Comedy and trivia are a part of their act.

They are entertainers, but they are not men.

"They" are the Rock-afire Explosion, the animated bands of ShowBiz Pizza restaurants.

And they are, indeed, a blast.

The franchise group includes Beach Bear, a laid-back polar bear decked out in swimming trunks atop a surfboard, hanging 10 fingers on lead guitar.

Billy Bob, a lovable brown bear, plays bass, while Dook, a space dog, plays drums. The spirit booster of the group, Mitzi the cheerleading mouse, wails a while and waves pom-poms with the likes of Looney Bird, a devil's advocate-type who also sings.

Percussionist-ventriloquist Rolfe, a half-wit wolf, and puppet companion Earl contribute vocal power to the group.

The musical clan is led by Fatz, a 6-by-6-foot gorilla who plays keyboard and sings bass in a stunning glittery-gold jacket and black bowtie.

"Fatz is in control. He tells everybody to shut up," said Curry Dawkins, a partner of Wilmington's ShowBiz, which opened in July.

"Beach Bear is cool," Dawkins added. "He never gets excited. A lot of people who are surfers can identify with him."

In addition to the musicians, the Rock-afire Explosion includes a singing moon and sun as background vocalists; Birthday Bird, a character that perches on Billy Bob's guitar; Choo Choo, a bear cub; and Antioch, a black-widow spider named after the first ShowBiz Pizza in Kansas City's Antioch Shopping Center.

Staff photos by Jack Upton

Children young — and not so young — enjoy the show at ShowBiz.

The band was created in 1980 by animator Aaron Fechter. Fechter, who also had a band called the Wolfe Pack Five, developed the Explosion from another animated attraction.

"He was looking at the Country Bear Jamboree (in Disneyworld)," said Richard Cook, manager of the Wilmington ShowBiz. Fechter, combined that idea with some ideas of his own to create the Rock-afire Explosion, Cook said.

Fechter exhibited his creation at a meeting of the Association of Amusement Parks, but park managers weren't interested. ShowBiz's Billy Bob Brockali (namesake of the Rock-afire character) was.

"They needed somebody like ShowBiz Pizza to market their product," Cook said. "How many amusement parks do you see being built?"

The ShowBiz franchise is booming. Some 220 of the restaurants are in the market, each with its own version of the Rock-afire Explosion.

A conglomeration of artistry, electronics, machinery, music and computer technology, the display cost $2 million to develop. It is sold to franchises for $125,000.

According to a company tape, the characters are built in groups of 25 in Orlando, Fla. The process takes a week and a half to complete.

The Explosion's 43,000 movements are individually programmed by computer signals and operated with air cylinders and compressors. It takes 24 hours to program one song with character movement.

Each character has 16 valves to carry its signals. About 150 gallons of air is used to run the local Explosion.

Approximately 350 hours of recording time goes into the group's soundtracks, which are created by Fechter's band. Fechter himself is the voice of Dook, while Burt Wilson is the bass behind leader Fatz.

Programmed recordings are sent to franchises about once a month.

The tapes include a country set complete with character attire, beach music, oldies-but-goodies, top 40 and a thriller of a tribute to Michael Jackson.

The Jackson tape opens with a group discussion about his visits to Disneyworld, followed by hit songs such as *Billie Jean*, *The Love You Save* and *Beat It*.

"We can't wait to see what he has in store for us," says Billy Bob at the conclusion of the Jackson show. "We could butcher some of that too," Beach Bear adds, nonchalantly.

The local franchise has 12 tapes, but only plays about half of them.

"We try to play the most popular ones," Dawes said.

"Around here, the country show is as popular as Michael Jackson," Cook added.

The Explosion performs six- to eight-minute sets about every three minutes. Shows are held in the dining room.

Because of wear and tear, costumes for the characters must be changed periodically. In the case of Fatz, that means $400 alone to replace his jacket.

In addition to daily shows, the band provides special birthday performances. A ShowBiz employee dressed as Billy Bob presents the birthday child (or adult) with a cake and leads the party in singing *Happy Birthday*. The walk-around Billy Bob, who also makes community appearances, does not talk.

"He hugs the kids and gives them five," Cook said.

The Billy Bob costume has a fan in its head and ice packs on the sides to keep the person inside cool.

In most cases, that person is Jim Allman, a technician for Rock-afire Explosion.

"[illegible] is like working in a carnival," Allman said.

ShowBiz managers and technicians are required to attend "ShowBiz College" in Irving, Texas, for three weeks.

In addition to parading as Billy Bob, Allman's main duty is to keep the Explosion's show working. He is required to maintain characters, including dismantling them daily to clean their eyes. The cleaning is necessary to remove accumulations of oil, which keeps the eyes movable.

"It is important that you get that straight-character eye contact," Cook said.

But such contact isn't always heart-warming.

"Fatz can look so scary sometimes," Allman said, "especially when I come in in the mornings to turn them on."

Many children are afraid of the bear, Cook said.

"I talk like them sometimes when the show isn't on," Allman said. "Children always come up to the stage when the curtain is closed to peep at the characters. One day a child did it and I said in the voice of Rolfe, 'Please don't open the curtain. I'm putting on my clothes.'

"Another child responded, 'See, Mommy, I told you they were real.'"

ANIMATION SPARKS
ROCK-AFIRE EXPLOSION
(Wilmington Morning Star - October, 1984)

Date of Origin: 1984
Archived: 4-24-08
Submission by Sptweb
Version 1.0

The documents contained herein are for educational use only. Please do not replicate, redistribute, or make any unauthorized printings. All intellectual property including characters, artwork, photography, and slogans are trademark and/or copyright their respective owners.